

Irvine parents question Tustin district's ability to provide schools

By Vu Nguyen
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What was supposed to be a annual meet-and-greet with the Tustin school district superintendent at Myford Elementary on April 17 turned into a forum attended by nearly 100 angry parents concerned about the halted school construction in West Irvine.

Hicks Canyon Elementary School and Arnold O. Beckman High School were expected to be under construction by now, but because anticipated state funds did not come through, the projects were put on an indefinite hold, forcing Myford to add eight portable classrooms to help compensate for the delays. The district is expected to pay upwards to \$368,000 for the classrooms next year. Both schools are in the Tustin Unified School District, but will serve families in the western part of Irvine.

Myford's enrollment of 500 is expected to grow to 650 next year.

The Irvine Co., which has been developing homes in the West Irvine-Tustin Ranch area, has been advertising in promotional brochures that the proposed Hicks Canyon Elementary School "is tentatively scheduled to open in the fall of 2002" and that Beckman High School "is tentatively scheduled to open in the fall of 2003."

Irvine Co. media relations representative Rich Elbaum has indicated that the firm is aware that construction of the two schools has been put on indefinite hold.

The majority of the parents at the meeting said they are worried about the high school situation. Residents living in West Irvine, North Park, North Park Square and Tustin Ranch fall within a Mello-Roos taxation district, meaning homeowners pay extra for new schools and some parents question why they are sending their children to Tustin High School, which has 18 portables, and Foothill with 21.

School superintendent Peter Gorman said he hopes a

\$13 billion state bond on the November ballot will pass so that the district can build the two schools. This would put Tustin in a position to receive matching funds immediately.

The district is in the middle of talks with the Irvine Co. to help with the development of schools until the November ballot passes. "We are in progress sharing financial and enrollment data," Gorman said. "That is all there is going on right now."

Elbaum said the Irvine Co. is working with Tustin Unified to explore options to help with the new schools.

West Irvine resident Lyann Collins said the problem doesn't lie with the district but with the rapid development in the West Irvine and Tustin Ranch areas.

"We are building so many homes here and apparently we don't have any schools to house those students," she said. "We need to build schools as we build homes. It's just common sense.

"When you buy a new home as of today, developers give you fliers showing off state-of-art schools like Hicks Canyon and Beckman High School. Residents are being misled. It's as simple as that. There is a problem when a developer doesn't provide basic services," she continued.

"When we decided to move here we had confidence in Irvine's educational track record. No one said that 'your children are going to a Tustin portable.' These issues ought to be disclosed before it is resolved. Why should a kid in south Tustin have West Irvine kids overcrowding their classrooms?"

Debbie Morrisset, who moved to West Irvine in August 1999 and has two children going to Myford, said she agrees with Collins' sentiments.

"I think that it is reprehensible that these developers are advertising that people are going to schools that don't exist," she said. "It is bizarre to me that there is no legislation on developers selling homes when schools are already way too crowded."

In the meeting, parents said they wanted their children transferred to nearby Northwood High School in the Irvine Unified School District. Irvine district officials say both Northwood and Irvine High School are accepting inter-district transfers, but they must be approved by the home district.

But the parents say the district will not approve the transfer requests.

"We've gotten approval from Northwood High School but the district doesn't want to give up the students," said West Irvine resident Deborah Gubernick.

"Parents want their children released to the Irvine School District but Tustin is holding them."

Gorman said typically inter-district transfers are generally not accepted except on a case-by-case basis. He said he could not speculate how much the Tustin district would lose in state funds if students were to transfer to Irvine Unified.

"We want keep the kids in our community schools and I know that we can provide a quality education for them," he said.

Board president Jonathan Ablove said that because of the overcrowding at the high school level, the district should look at all the options before making any decisions to turn down transfer requests. "I don't think we should force anyone to go to our district," he said.

Myford PTO member Deborah Gubernick said she wonders why students aren't being bused to Ladera Elementary, which is the same distance away as Myford and still has open classrooms.

"It's already overcrowded here. Even without the (150) students coming in next year, we would already need three more portables," she said.

"My main concern is that the portables will take up the majority of the upper grade playground space and the bus area on the east side of campus."

Gorman, explaining the delay in building the new schools, said the district had priority under a state funding system that was in place until the Los Angeles

Unified School District successfully sued the state last year to change the system. Los Angeles Unified now has the bulk of the money from the last state bond.

"We just got the rug pulled from under us from L.A. Unified who selfishly said there is a big pile of money from the state and took it," said Abelove.

State officials say there is \$450 million left in a 1998 state bond for school construction funding, but there are requests for state funds totaling \$2.9 billion.

Tustin is on an approved but unfunded list. "But we are continuing to work hard to open these schools," Gorman said.

Contact Vu Nguyen at (949) 224-0080 or vnguyen@ocregister.com.